

AFRICANS AND NATIVE AMERICANS:

THE RED-BLACK NEXUS

Did you know that over 300 years ago there were American Indians in West Africa? Can you picture Native American warriors fighting in Ghana, Guinea, and Angola, or Indian slaves being offered for sale in the slave markets of North Africa, the Canary Islands, Portugal and Spain? Or did you know Maya Indians from the Gulf of Honduras were sold as slaves in New York City, or that Black Africans escaping from slavery in Brazil, Peru, Mexico, Florida and many other places intermarried with Native Americans and produced large numbers of descendants called mulattoes or Zambos?

And what about Native Americans drifting to Europe as early as 60 BCE, or being carried as prisoners to Norway long before Columbus reached the Bahamas? Finally, what about reports of black people trading in the Caribbean before 1492, also prior to Columbus' voyage?

If these items of information are new to you, then you will probably enjoy finding out more by reading a new book entitled *AFRICANS AND NATIVE AMERICANS: THE LANGUAGE OF RACE AND THE EVOLUTION OF RED-BLACK PEOPLES*, published by the University of Illinois Press.

The author, Professor Jack D. Forbes of the University of California, Davis, became interested in this topic years ago when he discovered that many members of his own Powhatan-Renape Nation of Virginia had been classified as "mulattoes," "blacks," or "coloreds" in various documents or census records. This was puzzling because virtually every dictionary defined these terms without any reference to Native American ancestry, emphasizing only black and white racial origin. Forbes soon learned that the dictionaries and most of the "experts" were wrong and that he would have to dig deeply into actual usage to discover what such words as mulatto really meant.

In 1785 an advertisement was placed in a Virginia newspaper stating that one Joe had run away from slavery in Dinwiddie County. The ad said "He is a dark Mulatto... has bushy head of hair, and is of the Indian breed; is an excellent sawyer [saw-man]... plays on the violin...." Joe, who reportedly changed his name to Peter Tony after his escape, is typical of a large number of slaves, and not only in Virginia. In a South Carolina advertisement for 1762 we read about "a stout black Negro man... named Crack..." who had run away with "a free Indian wench, wife to the fellow Crack, who had a child with her about two years of age. A white wan was also seen in the canoe with them."

Such stories, or comparable ones, could be repeated from Mexico, Peru, Haiti, Cuba, Brazil, and even from Spain and other parts of Europe. Native

Americans were enslaved from New England to South America, and especially in South Carolina, the Caribbean region, and Brazil. Millions of Indians were enslaved, according to rough estimates, and of these many thousands survived to mix with Africans in Europe and Africa as well as in the Americas.

Yes it is true that Americans were sent as slaves to Europe, from at least 1493 onward, to meet African and white slaves of many tribes and nationalities. It is also true that Native Americans from Brazil were taken to Africa by the Dutch and Portuguese, the former using them as troops in 1637-1642 to conquer Portuguese forts in Guinea, Ghana, the Gulf of Biafra, and Angola.

Throughout most of the Americas one can find evidence of the constant interaction of Africans and Native Americans. In 1644 when the Dutch attacked Palmares, a major African Quilombo (freedom fort) in Brazil, they captured 31 prisoners of whom seven were Tupi Indians and several were young mixed-bloods, the rest being people of African origin. Literally millions of Brazilians today are a mixture of American and African ancestry, along with European. As a Brazilian scholar has stated:

from the beginning Brazil was more a Negro and Tupi product than a Western, Portuguese one.... Brazil is therefore a Mestizo Republic, neither European nor Latin American, the synthesis of Tupi, African, Occidental and Oriental antithesis, a unique and original creation.

But we find the same dynamic mixture of American (Indian) and African elements in many other regions, including the Caribbean. The latter area is especially significant to us in the U.S.A. because many Afro-Americans in the United States are descended from people who came from the Caribbean rather than directly from Africa. There is no question but what the largest mixed-blood group in the Caribbean region during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were the persons of Native American and African mixture. This came about because most Africans were males while Indians tended to have fewer males (due to the oppressive nature of Spanish exploitation). Moreover, after the 1540s, most (but not all) Indian women were free persons. As a Spanish Viceroy asserted in 1574: "Negro men prefer to marry Indian woman rather than Negro women, so that their children will be born free." Thus the "free colored" population of the Caribbean and surrounding regions primarily originated from African-Native American mixture.

Africans and Americans have been interacting intensively for at least five hundred years. What is especially intriguing is that this interaction is not confined to the Americas but extends also to Africa and Europe (where, incidentally, people of African and American ancestry from Suriname, Aruba, Curacao, French Guiana, Trinidad, Dominica, Guyana, and other areas are living today in considerable numbers in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Paris, London and other cities).

We can be sure that this process has been, and is, extremely significant in cultural terms and yet almost nothing has been done to explore the significance

of this subject. Histories of black music in North America, for example, usually don't mention "Indians" in the text or index.

Anthropologist Ashley Montagu suggested in 1944 that "The American Negro population of today is a composite of African, white, and Indian elements." Forbes' research confirms this thesis but also shows that many Native Americans are part-African.

Several hundred million people in the Americas probably share African and indigenous American ancestry, as do many thousands in Spain, Portugal and elsewhere. The story of this trans-Atlantic encounter is an exciting one, and Africans and Native Americans is, according to Mary W. Helms (in the journal ANTHROPOS):

an invaluable reference source for any scholar interested in race, population admixture, or general culture history not only of the New World but of the Atlantic oriented countries of Europe and Africa as well.

AFRICANS AND NATIVE AMERICANS is available in paperback at all major bookstores. Related articles by Forbes have appeared in JOURNAL OF ETHNIC STUDIES, AMERICAN INDIAN QUARTERLY, and the Powhatan newspaper ATTAN-AKAMIK. See Forbes' list of publications on his web page for information.